



## First and Second Halls of the RMS

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### Abstract

The Society's First Hall (1775-1852) in Surgeons' Square Towards the end of 1734, a group of six medical students agreed that they should meet in the evening once a fortnight at their respective lodgings, and that a dissertation on some medical subject, at the choice of the Society, should be composed and read at each of those meetings. This laid the foundations for the Royal Medical Society. The Medical Society was formally constituted in 1734 with ten members, and early meetings were held in a tavern close to the University. A president was appointed to supervise the business of the meeting, and fines were instituted for those that were absent without due cause. A treasurer was appointed to collect these dues, and a secretary appointed to provide a formal record of the proceedings.

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Figure 1. The Society's first hall is to the right, being No. 11 Surgeons' Square, next to the equally handsome building with numerous pillars which contained the extra-mural anatomical school of Barclay and subsequently Knox, called Barclay's House, at No.10. This was shortly to become infamous as the school that purchased the often still warm bodies of the victims of the notorious Burke and his accomplice Hare. Barclay died in 1826, and his classes were taken over by Knox. The building to the far left in the engraving is Old Surgeons' Hall, at No.8, and Gordon's class-room, formerly that of John Thompson, at No.9 is just seen between the latter and Barclay's House. This View of Surgeons' Square, published in 1830, was drawn by Thomas H. Shepherd, and engraved by T. Barber.



# First and Second Halls of the RMS.

An Early history of the Royal Medical Society, with observations on its first hall (1775-1852) in Surgeons' Square and second hall (1852-1966) at 7, Melbourne Place.

**Professor M.H.Kaufman**

## The Society's First Hall (1775-1852) in Surgeons' Square

Towards the end of 1734, a group of six medical students agreed that they should meet in the evening once a fortnight at their respective lodgings, and that a dissertation on some medical subject, at the choice of the Society, should be composed and read at each of those meetings. This laid the foundations for the Royal Medical Society. The Medical Society was formally constituted in 1734 with ten members, and early meetings were held in a tavern close to the University. A president was appointed to supervise the business of the meeting, and fines were instituted for those

that were absent without due cause. A treasurer was appointed to collect these dues, and a secretary appointed to provide a formal record of the proceedings.

Shortly after 1741, when the Infirmary moved from Robertson's Close to its new building in Infirmary Street, the managers permitted the Society to hold its meetings in one of their rooms, and the funds which had previously been spent on hiring rooms in a tavern were now deflected towards the accumulation of a library. With its increasing popularity amongst the students the accommodation at the Infirmary became too small for those who wished to attend the meetings, and the library

was particularly cramped and inconvenient to use. In 1771, a committee was established to investigate the possibility of the Society building its own hall, and a subscription list was opened at that time. By 1775, sufficient funds were available to begin the building of a hall on land granted to the society by the College of Surgeons on a site close to their own Hall in Surgeons' Square, adjoining the grounds of the old High School at the foot of Infirmary Street. The foundation stone was laid by Dr. William Cullen, one of the most ardent of the fund-raisers, and an address was given by the Senior President.

The first meeting in the new Hall was held in it on 26<sup>th</sup> April 1776. The building was a particularly handsome containing three principal rooms each measuring 30 by 20 feet. One served as a hall for the weekly meeting, another acted as a repository for the Societies valuable library, its natural history collection and anatomical preparations, and it was planned that the third room would be set up as a chemistry laboratory. The roof terminated in a cupola, the original intention being that this be used as an observatory. The atmosphere of the Society's Hall and its surroundings is best gained from an analysis of the well-known engraving of 1830 of the south-west corner of Surgeons' Square (figure 1). An important landmark occurred the early history of the Society when, following Counsel's advice, the members decided to procure a Royal Charter. This was subsequently granted by King George III on the 14<sup>th</sup> December 1778. The King furthermore indicated that in his view the Society's activities were entirely laudable and deserving of encouragement. The Charter was sealed at Edinburgh in January 1779, and the

Charter and Seal are now displayed in the Society's Hall at Bristo Square. Later that year, the Surgeons generously fixed the ground rent at £5 per annum.

In 1786, several small rooms were available in the Hall for the purposes of private dissection and chemical experiments, *although these had to be undertaken at the expense of the members concerned*. And only those experiments that had previously had the approval of the Society's Experimental Committee could be carried out.

During 1818-19, the membership rose to 84 and this posed particular problems in the Hall where the meetings took place, in the library and in the rooms set aside for scientific investigations. The Society could either restrict its membership, alter the building or consider the possibility of moving to new premises with more accommodation. A committee was accordingly set up to estimate the probable cost of a new building. Various options were considered, but none was proceeded with. In 1835, Barclays House became available, as Knox's classes became too small for their continued viability. The rooms were, however, too expensive for the society to afford. In 1837, an architect was engaged and numerous plans drawn up with proposed alterations to the Hall, including the addition of a third floor. No decision was, however, taken at that time and it was not until 1850 that the Society was compelled to find other accommodation.

A considerable number of sites were investigated, but for one reason or another, none proved suitable for the Society's needs. As the Managers of the Royal Infirmary had

bought an adjoining house for £600 it was estimated that the Society's Hall was not worth more than £400, and a subscription fund was established to support the purchase of a New Hall. The value of the Society's property was not enhanced by the fact that the south gable wall of the Society's Hall had been damaged by the pulling down of the adjacent building (Barclay House) during 1850 with a view to extending the Surgical Hospital. The Managers generous offer for the Society's property of £1700 was gratefully accepted. The sum raised, was however, insufficient to cover the £2000 needed to purchase Melbourne Place, and £600 of the Society's shares had to be realised in order to cover the purchase and furnishing of the Society's new premises. The last meeting of the Society held in the Old Hall in Surgeons' Square was on 12<sup>th</sup> November 1852 (Figure 2), and the first in the extensively refurbished New Hall took place one week later, so that by this means continuity was maintained.

### **The Society's Second Hall (1852-1966) at 7 Melbourne Place.**

Because insufficient funds were available to consider the building of a *new* hall that would be able to accommodate a meeting hall of adequate size for the considerable membership of the society, to house its extensive and valuable library, to provide experimental laboratories and rooms for the officers of the society as well as additional sundry committee rooms, it was accordingly decided to purchase the upper four floors of the tenement at 7 Melbourne Place. Despite the fact that extensive remodelling of the interior of the building was required to satisfy the needs of the society, all the work was completed during the following 6-7 months, and the Society was not only handsomely accommodated but was able to hold its first meeting in the New Hall on 19<sup>th</sup> November 1852.



Figure 2. Painting on wood by a Mr. Dallas of the Medical Society's Hall in Surgeons Square as it appeared shortly before its demolition. Note that Barclay's House, formerly located to the right of the Hall, is not shown, and that numerous minor differences exist between the depiction of the Hall shown here and in Shepherd's version (figure 1). This picture now hangs in the Society's Meeting Hall.

The group of buildings along Melbourne Place was erected in 1835, with the demolition of Old Bank Close the previous year. The first individuals to occupy No. 7 were Messrs. James and John Gray, who started trading there in 1837, and were the proprietors of various weekly and monthly broadsheets.

The view from the Front of the property was particularly impressive and the Society spanned five windows in width. The Fifth storey was ornate and in the Dutch gable style, and surmounted by a large golden eagle with outstretched wings in the Imperial Roman or French style (figure 3). The suggestion that the property had at one time been the Prussian Consulate appears to have been a folk legend associated with the Eagle.



Figure 3. External view of the frontage of No. 7 Melbourne Place, showing the main entrance doorway, flanked on either side by two shops. The width of the Society's premises is seen to include the five windows clearly displayed on the 2<sup>nd</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> floors. The Eagle, with spread wings, is mounted on the pinnacle above the 5<sup>th</sup> storey (with permission, Royal Commission on the Ancient Historical Monuments of Scotland).

Unfortunately, no records survive to indicate the extent of the alterations made to the fabric of Melbourne Place, but they were considerable. Substantial changes were made to the third and forth storeys of the building to produce the meeting hall, which fully extended the width of the property. The intervening floor had had to be removed, and the windows on the easterly-directed fourth floor that fronted onto Melbourne Place were always kept shuttered, while those on the third floor were always covered with heavily draped curtains. The roof of the Hall was timbered and supported by substantial wooden beams. A number of large fittings hanging from the ceiling supplied the majority of the lighting, and these were supplemented by small wall fittings, one pair on either side of the president's chair.

The president's enormous chair emblazoned with the society's emblem, was raised on a platform, with its back towards the middle of the eastern wall of the hall, directly in front of which was the president's desk. High on the wall above hung a painting depicting the Royal Arms of King George III. The secretary and two other officers of the Society sat at a table in front of the president to record the proceedings. To the left of the chair was the Society's Royal Charter, and to the right was the bust of Dr. John Gordon (figure 4). At the north end of the Hall (figure 5) was a marble fireplace, above which hung the painting of Andrew Duncan *Sur*. At the opposite end of the hall was a similar fireplace, and on this wall hung paintings of William Cullen and Joseph Black.



Figure 4 (Above) Internal view of the eastern side of the meeting hall, showing the president's chair and desk, both raised on a platform, in front of which is the secretary's table. To the left of the president's chair is the Society's Royal Charter, to the right is Gordon's bust, and above the chair is the Coat of Arms of King George III. Figure 5. (left) View of the south end of the hall, showing the painting of Andrew Duncan Snr. Note in particular, the patterned wall covering with its very ornate borders.

(Both figures with permission. The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Scotland).

The wall coverings in a drab olive-green stucco were particularly memorable. The background was floral in design and interspersed in a regular pattern with the logo of the Society - the scrolled letters "RMS" surmounted with a small crown against a plain background. The heavily ornate borders were about a foot wide; on the north and south walls the vertical borders included the medical insignia, a staff associated with an entwined snake. High up in the centre on each wall was a very ornate Royal Coat of Arms, and on either side exotic shields, one of which announced "Society Instituted A.D. 1737", while the other proclaimed "Incorporated by Royal Chartist A.D.1778" (Figure 5). The whole impression was that of a very conservative gentleman's club, which is exactly what it was until the last year of the Society's existence at Melbourne Place , in 1964, when female medical students were first admitted to membership of the Society.

Above the meeting hall, the fifth storey was originally fitted out as the librarian's house, while the small rooms on the fourth floor initially served as a museum. On the third floor, the two smaller rooms accommodated some of the Society's older books, while the other room was adapted in 1938 to preserve the most valuable books in the collection. On the second floor were accommodated the north and south libraries, and the secretary's and librarian's rooms.

The main door of the premises opened into a wide entrance passage and the foundation stone which had been recovered by the workmen with the demolition of the Hall in Surgeons' Square in 1853 was, in due course,

incorporated into the wall of the staircase. It is now displayed in the Society's present Hall at Bristo Square. The ground floor only consisted the entrance passage, as two shops were situated one on the south and the other on the north side of the society's main door and entrance.

The entire block of properties in Melbourne Place was compulsorily purchased by the Edinburgh City Council in 1965, and demolished shortly afterwards, being replaced by the Council Offices of no architectural merit whatsoever. When the Society's premises were demolished, the original Foundation stone to the first hall and the eagle from the pinnacle of No. 7 were rescued (figure 6) with one or two other smaller mementoes, and these are now displayed in the Society's present premises in Bristo Square. Indeed it was one of the author's first duties as senior president, in October 1966, to accompany the eagle as it flew from Melbourne Place to Hill Square *en route* to its present eyrie at Bristo Square.

The excellent relationship that has always existed between the Society and the Royal College of Surgeons came to the Society's rescue when the College offered the Society Temporary premises at £. Hill Square, close to the site of the Society's first Hall in Surgeons' Square. While far smaller than Melbourne Place , it provided the Society with a breathing space during which a more pleasant site could be found. Unfortunately because of the lack of space, only the bound dissertations and a relatively small proportion of the Society's enormous collection of books could be adequately displayed.



Figure 6 Rescuing the eagle from the ruins of Melbourne Place, On the back of this photograph is a contemporary inscription: "The eagle leaving 7 Melbourne Place on 23/10/66 for Hill Square attended by the Senior President, Mr. M.H. Kaufman and Miss F.M. Marr and Mr.R.Nixon, Junior Presidents" (In the author's possession).

An appeal Committee was established and recommended that a major part of the historical collection of books be sold. It was, however, accepted that the Society should keep as the foundations of a continuing library its unique collection of dissertations by members, complete from 1759, together with a selection of books of particular relevance to the Society and to Edinburgh medicine.

Gray in his *History of the Royal Medical Society 1737-1937* (1952) wrote that "The Society is primarily, but not purely, a student society. There is a senior element, never intrusive, but careful to ensure adherence to sound traditions. With the maintenance of these traditions, the Royal Medical Society of

Edinburgh will continue to flourish". It is to be hoped that these ideals, and the continuity with the past that they embrace, will be maintained.

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